

Greater Hartford Legal Aid

TESTIMONY OF GREATER HARTFORD LEGAL AID, INC.  
IN SUPPORT OF RAISED BILL NO. 5567, AN ACT CONCERNING ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS  
March 17, 2014

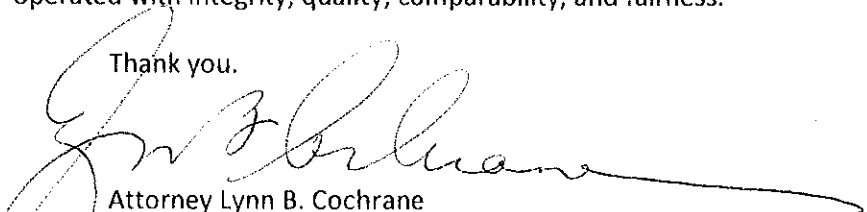
My name is Lynn Cochrane and I am a staff attorney in the education unit of Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc., a non-profit legal services office representing low-income persons in Hartford County for over 50 years. Greater Hartford Legal Aid strongly urges this committee to support Raised Bill No. 5567, AAC Alternative Schools.

Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc. has represented hundreds of children with and without disabilities who need education advocacy. With respect to alternative education, we often represent clients who have struggled academically and behaviorally in public schools and who have been moved to alternative programs, sometimes through the expulsion process, but many more times through the principal's recommendation and the parent's unwitting acquiescence.

In Hartford County, the range of quality in these programs is astonishing. They can provide sometimes two or perhaps four hours a day of instruction. They might be housed in somewhat temporary quarters, apart from the public school, or they might be a regular seeming school building with a full day program, but without the full range of core academic programs regular public schools offer, such as science labs. It is important to know that many students sent to these programs have not been expelled, and have not been identified as needing special education, although their struggles suggest they should be evaluated for such. It is also important to know that in some towns, students eligible for special education have been sent to programs which provide a mere 16 hours per week of education, without benefit of a Pupil Placement Team meeting which specifically finds a shortened school day is absolutely necessary. Once sent to these programs, regular education students may also be provided a shortened school day, even without an expulsion. These transfers are either questionably legal or outright illegal. Parents, often at their wits' end, do not know their rights, and do not know how to challenge these decisions. While the programs may be proud that they help stem the tide of drop-outs, they may do so at the cost of providing the students a useful education.

Some towns are trying to improve education in these alternative schools. Synergy in East Hartford commissioned an outside evaluation, and appears fully engaged in implementing its many recommendations to bring that program's academic standards up to acceptable levels. It is therefore vitally important that this committee support this bill, so that these programs are designed and operated with integrity, quality, comparability, and fairness.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lynn B. Cochrane", written over a horizontal line.  
Attorney Lynn B. Cochrane

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